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Background

Venezuela: Democracy & Human Rights

During 2000, there were no reports of targeted political killings. The rate of extrajudicial killings, primarily of criminal suspects, by security forces increased. An estimated 170 killings (including summary executions of suspects, indiscriminate or excessive use of force, and death resulting from mistreatment) were attributed to security forces from 10/1999-09/2000. There exists a climate of official acceptance of the excessive use of force; during election campaigns, politicians have adopted slogans such as "the only good criminal is a dead criminal."

While overcrowding was reduced in some prisons, prison conditions continued to be extremely harsh owing to underfunding, poorly trained and corrupt prison staff, violence, and overcrowding in some prisons so severe as to constitute inhuman and degrading treatment. Arbitrary arrest and detention increased. Lengthy pretrial detention, and corruption and severe inefficiency in the judicial and law enforcement systems also were problems. The Government struggled to implement the Organic Criminal Procedures Code (COPP), which required a major shift from a secretive inquisitorial system to an open adversarial system; however, there were successes including a reduction in the number of prisoners who had not been convicted of a crime.

The December 1999 Constitution created the position of "Defender of the People," i.e., "Ombudsman". The Ombudsman, the Prosecutor General and Controller General make up the "Citizen Power" branch of government. The Ombudsman has been an active advocate for the respect of human rights.

A wide variety of human rights groups generally operate without government restriction on their investigative activities or the publishing of their findings. However, in November 2000, the Supreme Court ruled that NGO's receiving funding from foreign governments or with non-Venezuelan leaders are not part of "civil society" and, therefore, may not represent Venezuelans in court or bring their own legal actions.

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